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Thomas L. Wells
Minister

Helping Your Child Learn, Part 2: Practical Suggestions

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*What parents can do
to help with:*

Reading
Writing
Spelling
Mathematics

Science
Social Studies
Art & Music

What parents can do to help

Part 1 of this fact sheet, "What You Should Know About the Learning Process", explained some of the principles that are the basis of learning and explored the parent's role in general terms. Part 2 offers suggestions that will help parents improve their children's learning.

The first thing to remember is that each child is a unique individual with his/her personal timetable for learning to walk, talk, read – for developing any skill that involves growing up. Respect your child's individuality and do not compare him/her with other children who may be learning at a faster or slower rate.

Reading

- If you want your children to read, show them that you read a lot and that you *enjoy* it – that reading is not only useful and necessary but also *pleasurable*.
- *Children learn to read by reading.* Provide an atmosphere that offers opportunities for reading. Keep a variety of reading material around the house and plan some quiet reading time each day...
- Read to your children often; listening to stories teaches them concentration. Take frequent trips to the library and make it an adventure for the children. Give them any assistance they need, but don't choose their books for them; let them make their choices.
- Show your children that reading is a necessary skill. When you're out with them, ask them to read out road signs, the names of streets and stores, and parking signs. Ask their help in looking up addresses in the phone book, items and their prices in catalogues, programs in the TV guide, etc.
- Children like to have their "own" things. Include books among presents on festive occasions such as Christmas and birthdays, and buy your children books as often as your budget allows. (There are a lot of good, inexpensive books around, although you may have to do some detective work to locate them.) Let each child have a special place to keep his/her books; to some children, books are as personal as their clothes, and even more precious.
- If you have a child who isn't showing much interest in reading, try leading him/her to books by way of other interests. Get him/her books on a favourite hobby, sport, or personality. And don't give up if your child has unusual interests: there are books on *everything* and you can find them if you look hard enough.

You might also like to try a subscription to a children's magazine.

Writing

- Reading and writing activities that mean something to children are more likely to produce results. Have a bulletin board on your refrigerator door or kitchen wall and make note-writing a family habit. Write out instructions regarding snacks and chores and encourage your children to write shopping reminders for you.
- Encourage letter-writing: fan letters, thank-you letters, letters of inquiry. Have your children keep diaries.
- Show that you think neat, legible handwriting is important by writing that way yourself. Make your children understand that neat, legible handwriting is important because other people have to read their writing.
- Provide your children with a suitable writing area and make sure they have suitable paper and sharpened pencils or a good pen. Have a dictionary in the house and show them how to use it.
- Have a place where the children can paint and crayon or cut-and-paste without having to worry about making a mess. Encourage them to write stories about the pictures they have drawn. Help them start a scrapbook of favourite pictures collected from newspapers and magazines; have them write their comments beside each picture.
- Reading and writing go together. By encouraging your children to write and illustrate their own story books, you can provide them with a new reason for practising reading and writing skills. Start a book entitled *All About Me*. Begin with a picture of the child. Print a sentence or two beneath it, such as "This is me. My name is _____ . I was born on _____ . My mother's name is _____ . My father's name is _____ ." Gradually, the child creates a personal book that can be read aloud to the family. It is important that the words used be those of the child.
- As a manual skill, writing depends on muscular co-ordination. You can help your children develop this kind of co-ordination through such activities as painting, work with clay, use of scissors and crayons, throwing and catching a ball.
- In the early grades children learn to print. Alphabet cards (cards that show a picture and letter or word) are available in better toy shops. At this stage of their development, some children still lack the co-ordination required to make small letters. Give them large sheets of paper to work with at first so that they'll have space for large printing.
- Printing is not a "baby method" of writing, but a very useful skill. So if some of your children aren't ready to switch over to writing as soon as some of their classmates, don't pressure them; they'll take that step when they are ready.
- Use home-made puppets and have your children act out stories they have read. Have them write scripts and

put on their own shows – with you as an audience. Have your children write out and learn the words of favourite recordings. Getting “pop” songs down on paper from listening is one form of taking dictation. Make up new headlines by cutting out words from the newspaper.

Play with riddles, nursery rhymes, and tongue-twisters such as “Peter Piper picked a peck of . . .” Play word games like *spill-and-spell*, *scrabble*, or *word bingo*.

Spelling

- Word games are useful in helping children learn to spell. Riddle-type games are also fun; for example, “I am thinking of a *colour* word that begins with *b* and has four letters. What’s the word and how do you spell it?” Or ask each child how many “happy” words he/she knows how to spell (*gay, jolly, cheerful, merry, smile*). How many “sad” words? How many “sound” words? (Other categories might include food, animals, vehicles, numbers, etc.)
- When you play together with letters or words, help your children see significant differences between one letter and another or between one word and another. It is just as easy for a child to distinguish between two words like *cat* and *bat* as it is to distinguish between *c* and *b*. Play with whole words where possible.
- Observe your child’s learning: does he/she rely solely on sounding out words or is he/she also interested in writing them down to see how they look? Help him/her to use both approaches.
- We’ve all noticed that children pay as much attention to TV commercials as they do to the programs. Turn this interest to good use in a spelling game. Ask your children to name the products they see advertised and to spell the words – *automobile, bread, bottle, soap, shampoo* – the list is endless.
- Give your children the chance to use the words they have learned to spell. Encourage them to write notes and letters – to you, to other children, to relatives.
- An important thing to remember is that children’s thoughts often soar far beyond their ability to put them into writing. So be patient and tolerant towards misspellings in your children’s early creative writing; if you insist on accuracy, you’ll restrict their creativity and perhaps turn them away from writing. Guide them towards accuracy without clipping the wings of their imagination.

Mathematics

- Children take to mathematics naturally. What parent hasn't on occasion been exhausted by his/her children's natural curiosity – the endless flow of questions beginning with *how many, how much, how far, how fast, how big, how small?* Put this interest to use around the home – let them count, measure, and double-check things for you. Beginners can be asked to count out cookies for their snack and check whether the bag of oranges really contains a dozen, as claimed. The older children can double-check your grocery bills, measure out ingredients for recipes, measure windows for curtains or blinds, and estimate how much food you'll need for parties. You can also encourage them to keep the distance and gasoline records when you take a trip by car.
- Have young children sort out buttons, straws, play bricks, or other items by size, shape, colour, or quantity.
- Have your children record facts about themselves – height, weight, hand span, length of arm, and so on – preferably in metric. Incidentally, if you are not familiar with metric units, don't discourage your children from using them. Perhaps you can all improve your knowledge of the new units by making estimates and then checking to see how close you came to the right metric measure.
- Help your children see that mathematics is a skill that is really needed. Have them list some of the everyday items that can be understood and used only by someone with mathematical know-how – a thermometer, barometer, automobile speedometer, rain gauge, weather map, measuring instruments, boxes or cans labelled to show how much they contain, recipes, graphs, road maps, timetables, sales slips, bank books, cheques, receipts.
- Give your children toys, games, instruments, and other things that will acquaint them with simple mathematical ideas and encourage them to count, measure, estimate, and investigate. The list might include an abacus, a clock, scales, a ruler, a calendar, a compass, number and riddle games, magic squares, brain teasers, and puzzle books.
- Play number games with your children – dominoes, bingo, monopoly, etc.
- Give your children quick mental drills in addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. They'll enjoy the test, and the mental exercise will be useful since most of the arithmetic problems they'll meet in everyday life will have to be tackled mentally.
- Play estimation games with jars of different sizes or shapes: How many beans in this jar? Is there more water in this jar than in that one?

Start your children early on an allowance. Stress that it's not a handout, but a share of family money that is given to them to manage and use for their needs and pleasures.

If you are not too good at mathematics or have no patience with the metric system, keep this to yourself. The children won't think mathematics is fun if they know you don't like it.

Science

Children have a natural curiosity about their environment, and the everyday occurrences that adults take for granted fill them with wonder. Why does it rain? What makes snow melt? What makes a candle burn? Where does electricity come from? You can help to develop your children's natural desire for knowledge. If they come to you with a question when you are busy, promise to take it up later and answer the question to their satisfaction. Take one question at a time and build a project around it. If your child is interested in *rain*, for example, have him/her draw pictures and write stories about it. Get books from the library that deal with the subject (e.g., stories or poems about storms, clouds, spring, drought) and read them to or with him/her. Take frequent trips into the country and let your children roam through the fields and forests. They'll find birds and insects to watch, plants and soil to study, flowers to examine and admire – a whole living museum of science.

Take your children to planetariums, aquariums, zoos, museums of natural history and science. When you visit Toronto, allow plenty of time for a tour of the Ontario Science Centre and discuss with your children what they have seen.

Share your children's interests and enthusiasms, even though they may change frequently. If a child likes outer space, buy an inexpensive telescope to watch the stars and decorate his/her room with charts of the solar system.

Help your children do simple experiments in chemistry with such things as candles, lumps of sugar, vinegar, baking soda, and bread. There are many books that outline simple and safe demonstrations of basic scientific principles – but remember that chemistry experiments can be dangerous and should be supervised by an adult.

Have your children listen to science programs on the radio and on TV. Listen and watch with them whenever possible and talk about the programs afterwards.

Social Studies

The term "social studies" sometimes baffles parents. Social studies includes *history, geography, political science, citizenship, sociology, and anthropology*. The aim of social studies is to acquaint your children with the world and its people. Through social studies they will get a feeling of belonging to and responsibility towards their community, their province, their country, and their world. Therefore the parents who are thoughtful and responsible citizens – whose lifestyle reflects concern for the needs and rights of others – are giving their children the best foundation in social studies.

- The child begins to learn in the give-and-take and sharing of family life. Young children are naturally self-centred and find it difficult to see another's point of view. However, if they are given opportunities for sharing, taking turns, and helping others, they will soon gain awareness of the rights and responsibilities of each family member and thus begin to learn about co-operation and respect for the rights and views of others.
- Social studies must start with the familiar – the child's family, neighbourhood, and community – and gradually move out to the larger world. Help your children explore their community. Visit the airport, the docks, the railroad station, the courthouse, factories, historical landmarks, parks, and museums. Help them get acquainted with the work that other people do in the community – policemen, firemen, the postman, the butcher, the baker, the bank manager, the garbage man.
- Help your children to see each person as an *individual*. Show them that you respect other cultures and races while feeling proud of your own.
- On trips, have your children draw pictures and make notes of things that interest them along the way – buildings, waterways, factories, farms, animals. This will help them sharpen their sense of observation.
- If you're a faithful follower of news broadcasts and a reader of newspapers and news magazines, your children will get the idea that it's important to keep up with current affairs. Discuss news at the dinner table and let your children express their views. Discuss local candidates for public office and the issues and problems of your community.
- Watch special news and documentary programs with your children and discuss them afterwards, with frequent reference to an atlas or almanac. ("Let's look it up" should be one of the most common phrases around your house.)
- Do you have any neighbours who are newcomers to Canada? Do your children attend school with children from other ethno-cultural groups? Encourage your

children to make friends with these newcomers and to invite them into your home to share ideas and customs. Children who have played together can work in harmony together as adults.

Art and Music

All children need to sing, dance, draw, and "make believe". Encourage your children by giving them appropriate materials to work with at home – paper and paint, wood and clay, bells and drums – not colouring books that they trace or musical gadgets that they wind up or just look at. Display their artwork around the home.

Help your children learn to appreciate lines, shapes, texture, and colour by showing them works of art as often as possible. Such design, texture, and colour may also be found in a broad range of natural and manufactured objects such as plants and furniture. Good reproductions of prints are plentiful and inexpensive. Let your children turn the kitchen, the hall, or their rooms into "art galleries".

Begin the gallery habit early. Take the younger children for short visits at first. Lengthen your visits gradually, and take them often.

Provide things that will awaken *all* the senses – not just the sense of sight. Give them toys or objects that are fun to touch or smell. Remember, though, that you don't have to go out and *buy* things that can be used to arouse your child's sense of hearing, touch, and smell; all you need to provide is your time and imagination. Have your children make their own cards for holidays and special occasions – valentines, Christmas cards, birthday cards. On gift-giving occasions, have the younger children finger-paint designs on paper for wrappings or have them put their own decorative touches on boxes or cartons.

Encourage the children to be music-makers as well as listeners. Again, you don't *need* to buy things. Bells, drums, cymbals, or a toy xylophone are fine learn-as-you-play aides, but a spoon and a pan lid make as good a drum as the real thing. Children can learn as much about rhythm by clapping their hands together as they can by using a fancy instrument.

Make your children aware of the sounds around them. On the bus, or in the backyard, have your children close their eyes and listen. What do they hear? Have them discuss it.

If you own a tape recorder, have the children record a variety of natural and mechanical sounds in your neighbourhood. Play the tape and ask the children to identify the various sounds.

- Play sound games with your children. Ask each child to reproduce a certain sound (wind, cars, water, animal sounds) and have the others guess what the sound is.
- Let your children hear music in the home. Play your own records when the children are around, and check the radio and TV listings for music programs that the whole family can enjoy.
- Take your children to concerts and children's symphony performances.
- Have silent times in the house, so that your children may learn to appreciate quiet. Children who grow accustomed to continuous background music may cease to be aware of it, or even become afraid of quiet.

These are but a few of many ways in which you can stimulate your child's natural curiosity to learn. As a parent you will no doubt discover many others.

